

Remarks Presented at the Native American Training Institute's 8th Annual North Dakota Indian Child Welfare Act Conference in Bismarck, ND on Thursday, March 5, 2009 by Thomas F. Sullivan, Regional Administrator for the Administration for Children and Families in Denver, CO.

A. Introduction

I would like to thank the Native American Training Institute for their kind invitation to be here with you today. This is the 4th straight year that I have been invited to come and speak with you

All of you need to know a little bit more about me. I am in my 7th year as Denver Regional Administrator for the Administration for Children and Families. In that capacity my staff and I are responsible for the management and oversight of Head Start, Child Welfare, TANF, Child Care, Child Support Enforcement and a multitude of smaller, but no less significant, programs in the six state region of Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

I was born and grew up in a first generation Irish Catholic family in suburban Boston. As a kid I thought everything west of the Charles River was Indian Country. I did not realize how correct I was until I arrived in Denver.

My wife and I are the parents of three and the grandparents of seven. We are in the 43rd year of our marriage and have no earthly idea how we have gotten this far. We have been incredibly blessed. One of the unexpected benefits of being grandparents is that our grandchildren are doing some of the same things to their parents that our kids did to us. Now our kids are calling to apologize for what they put us through. So, if you're dealing with teens, take heart because in a few years they may be apologizing to you for what they are now putting you through.

B. Thank You

All of you work in child protective services, working to stop child sexual abuse and domestic violence. I want to thank you for the difficult work you do. You work without adequate resources in communities that have and have had for years Unemployment and Poverty Rates that the majority community has never seen, not even during the Great Depression, with many of your caseworkers handling, on average, 75 to 150 cases when the standard that most state programs meet is no more than 12 – 15 cases per worker. Your computer systems are primitive not linked to each other, to your Tribal Court or to the state child welfare system. When you do your job you are subjected to threats to your continued employment, your health and safety. You have had your tires slashed, pets killed and the windows on your vehicles shot out. All levels of law enforcement, knowing about the threats to your well-being and personal safety have apparently done nothing to stop it. In response some of you have sought and obtained conceal carry permits or have placed loaded weapons around your home so you are never more than a few feet from

one in an emergency. Despite all of this you do an extraordinarily effective job. By your effectiveness, you make life better for me and for everyone else in this country.

C. Recent History

When I arrived on Tuesday I was greeted by Deb Painte, the long term Deputy Director of the Institute, who became Executive Director when Institute founder and only prior Executive Director Jody Gillette left that position to accept President Obama's invitation to join his White House team. Deb gave me a big hug, saying, "I have your nametag right here with a big orange ribbon on it with your title, Troublemaker". Her comment struck a chord with me because that is a term of derision that some of the prior administration's political leadership as well as some of those continuing to occupy senior career positions in my agency hung on me in their long-term effort over the last 4+ years to marginalize me and to prevent me from dealing with the twin epidemics of child sexual abuse and child suicide in Indian Country. That term is the only one they used that I feel comfortable repeating in polite society.

Six weeks ago I was on a South Dakota Reservation where I was told by one of their leaders that they had been told by a senior political official in my agency, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) , "Everyone in Washington, DC knows about the violence and child sexual abuse in Indian Country but no one will do anything to fix it because it would be too expensive to fix". A few weeks later when I mentioned this quote to a friend, who has strong Republican ties and who is a county welfare director in another state, they said that they had heard the same explanation for the failure to address the violence and child sexual abuse in Indian Country – it will be too expensive to fix. I suspect none of us would delay our effort to stop the rape of a child because someone in the Washington political elite said, "it will be too expensive".

Three weeks ago I received a letter from the US Department of Justice in response to a complaint I filed with the Attorney General more than a year ago about the failure of US Attorneys all across this region as well as in a neighboring state to take any effective action to stop the criminal interference with your efforts to protect children and to stop domestic violence or to prosecute reported, investigated and confirmed cases of child sexual abuse referred for criminal investigation and prosecution by many of you and your counterparts in other states. After more than a year's delay in responding to my complaint, the letter said the failure of the US Attorneys to prosecute any of the criminal interference with you in fulfilling your duties or to criminally investigate or prosecute 99.9% of the child sexual abuse cases referred to them by those identified in my letter of complaint was essentially the proper exercise of discretion by the US Attorneys.

These positions by the last Administration's senior political leadership of ACF as well as by those of the US Attorneys are supposedly the "responsible" ones.

I take exception to that view. That's apparently why I was given the derisive title of "Troublemaker".

I am honored to be known as a “Troublemaker” if it means I stand with you in your efforts to stop the twin epidemics of child sexual abuse and child suicide raging in Indian Country.

I am honored to be known as a “Troublemaker” if it means if I stand with you against the economic ignorance and despicable discrimination of “it’s too expensive to fix”.

I am honored to be known as a “Troublemaker” if it means I stand with you against the irresponsible Department of Justice position that their failure to prosecute sexual predators is nothing more than the proper exercise of discretion.

I trust none of you will object to being characterized as “troublemakers” if it means being responsible advocates for children. Those who oppose us should be properly labeled the deviants they are.

D, Child Sexual Abuse and Child Suicide

Child sexual abuse is not a problem in Indian Country alone. The National Resource Council estimates that anywhere from 20% to more than 60% of the national population has been sexually abused. In Indian Country we are publicly speaking about child sexual abuse. Such discussions are not occurring in most of the majority community. A psychologist with extensive experience in counseling clients in Indian Country recently wrote: “It is unusual for me to work with a man or woman, a boy or girl, who has not had their trust betrayed sexually by a person they ought to have been able to trust. It is a ‘big elephant’ in our front room and a factor in some of the hopelessness/helplessness/rage many of our young express in their choice of hanging as a problem solver.”

Science magazine in April, 2005 reported that while \$2.00 is spent on research for every \$100 spent on Cancer, only 5 cents is spent on research for every \$100 spent on Child Maltreatment.

That research does, however, show there are identifiable risk factors for Child Sexual Abuse. They include the following ten factors:

- Having few friends;
- Absent or unavailable parents;
- Presence of a stepfather;
- Conflict with or between parents
- Physical or mental disability;
- Separate living arrangements from both biological parents;
- Mental illness;
- Alcoholic or drug abuse in family;
- A parent who was physically or sexually abused as a child;
- Homes with other forms of abuse, prostitution or transient adults.

Research has found that Child Sexual Abuse of girls is minimal in those families where none of these risk factors are present. Other research shows that in those families where three or more of these risk factors are present 78% of the children in these families were sexually abused. This research suggests some approaches that may begin to reduce the level of child sexual abuse we all confront.

We need to begin changing those community standards which appears to treat so much dysfunctional behavior as acceptable, normal. At this conference we have heard about some efforts that seem to have promising potential. They include:

- The mentoring program being implemented at Standing Rock by DJ Two Bears and his team.
- The Code of Ethics for their staff being implemented by the Lakota Oyate Wakanyeja Owicakiyapi (LOWO) staff at Pine Ridge requiring abstinence from drug and alcohol use and abuse as well as leading an exemplary family life as well as comparable codes in other Reservation communities.
- The youth from another reservation who banded together to demand their Tribal Chairman, his chief of staff and the Council stop their drinking and public drunkenness that was providing such a bad example to the youth of their reservation.
- The mentoring program implemented several years ago by Mark LoMurray working with the North Dakota State Department of Health to provide mentors to every child in the state who wanted one and which has been credited with reducing North Dakota youth suicide completions by 20%.
- The three day workshop developed by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute (TLPI) to assist people to develop and implement strategies to end child sexual abuse in their communities. TLPI will be presenting that workshop in South Dakota at the end of this month for representatives from the nine South Dakota Tribes. If successful I hope we will be able to offer comparable workshops in every other state within this region.
- In late August, 2008 the North Dakota Human Services program leadership, with other state and tribal leaders at the invitation of the former state Child Welfare Director, Paul Ronningen, met with me to discuss how their programs might be more effectively organized to serve the needs of children at risk. Because of the changes in leadership at the state level the second meeting of that group has been delayed until later today, convened by the new state Child Welfare Director, Tara Muhlhauser.

All of us need additional resources if we are to be more effective in doing our work But we also need to examine how effectively we are using the resources we now have. For example, Head Start is a marvelous program giving young, poor kids a better chance at success in school. Is it possible that Head Start, if it were to become a full-day, full-year program either on its own dime or in combination with Child Care Funds, focusing on at risk children, those who lived in homes with a high level of the risk factors outlined above, could contribute to the ending of child sexual abuse by providing a safe place for those kids. What will it take to begin moving in this direction?

When emergencies are declared as they have so many times recently due to hurricane strikes on Gulf and Atlantic Coast communities there seems to be no limit on the emergency services and money that are made available to the residents and governments of these areas. I would like to suggest to you that the conditions each of you deal with are at least as bad as, if not worse than, those found after most hurricane strikes to coastal communities. Conditions in Indian Country are long standing resulting from neglect and the unwillingness of some to deal with these problems as well as the unwillingness of many to be subjected to the derisive labeling by those who wish to avoid dealing with these issues. That must change. These conditions must be labeled and treated as the true emergencies they are.

E. A Story

Last evening Howard Rainer spoke about that marvelous team, the Standing Rock Lady Warriors and their first round game this evening in the state tournament. I would like to conclude with a story about a young Lakota lady, one of the best basketball players the State of South Dakota has ever seen, a story which I believe is relevant to the issues we all deal with – inadequate resources to do the work we need to do.

In the Fall of 1988 Sue Anne Big Crow was a freshman member of Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes basketball team which traveled to Lead, SD, in the middle of the Black Hills, for one of their first games of the year.

The Lead gym is very small with few seats even for the hometown fans. This night, those fans were especially obnoxious with loud war whoops, drumming, and shouts of ‘commod bods’, all calculated to offend the visiting team, booming throughout the gym. Some in those stands probably remembered the response of the Lakota Nation to the 1980 Supreme Court decision about the taking of the Black Hills in which Justice Blackmun wrote that this was the most egregious treaty violation by this nation. This decision awarded \$100 million to the plaintiffs who, to this day, have refused to take any of this money, demanding the only decision that will be satisfactory – the return of their sacred Black Hills to them. I am confident the response of the Lakota Nation to this decision was one of the reasons for such obnoxious behavior.

Typically, the visiting team is the first on the court lead by their seniors. This night the Pine Ridge seniors, intimidated by the hostile crowd noise told their coach they could not lead their team onto the court. Freshman Sue Anne Big Crow volunteered to lead her team onto the floor and she did.

When Sue Anne reached half court, she stopped, passed the ball to the senior following her, turned to the Lead fans and began to sing a song, both taught to her by her grandmother. It was a traditional shawl dance, using her warm-up jacket as the shawl. As she sang and danced, the Lead fans began to go quiet until there was total silence in the gym when Sue Anne completed her dance and song.

As she took the basketball from her team-mate, the Lead fans spontaneously broke into loud applause and clapping. That was the immediate effect of Sue Anne's efforts. Since those Lead and Pine Ridge ladies teams were dominant in the state, they were invited to many national and international tournaments. After this game, those teams and their families traveled together to these tournaments. To this day Lead and Pine Ridge families visit back and forth to each other's homes, sharing holidays with each other.

This was all accomplished by a 14 year old high school freshman wearing only her basketball uniform.

I often think back to that story when I am trying to sort through what I have accomplished in a particular day or week. I have to admit that I have not yet measured up to the accomplishments of this 14 year old freshman basketball player. That is simply amazing. After all I have the benefit of age, education and position. How is it that a 14 year old girl, demonstrating courage far beyond her age, a freshman, in nothing more than a basketball uniform has accomplished so much with a dance and song taught by her grandmother?

Let me suggest that all of us have to examine how effectively we have fulfilled our responsibilities within the context of the achievements of Sue Anne Big Crow. Why haven't we done more with all of the benefits of education, position and resources which we enjoy? By suggesting we ask ourselves this question, I am not recommending we should be comfortable with less than adequate resources. I am, however, suggesting that we, you and I, need to be more effective than we have been, no matter how limited those resources may be.

We all face the same difficult task Sue Anne Big Crow did in that Lead gym more than 20 years ago. She won over those fans and began what was to be a lifetime of friendship between the two groups where a few minutes before there had been nothing but anger and hostility from one group towards the other.

We work daily to stop the violence and child sexual abuse. Which one of us has within us the ability to turn our world on its head as Sue Anne did, confounding all observers? Let us return to our communities today committed to achieving what Sue Anne did, achieving what no one believes we can do by ending all violence and child sexual abuse in our communities.

Thank you again for the work you do. You make life better not just in your communities but for us all no matter where you may work and no matter where we may live.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.